

CIVIL ENGINEERS HONE SEARCH, RESCUE SKILLS AT COMBAT TOWN

By Sgt. Brent C. Powell

CENTRAL TRAINING AREA, Okinawa, Japan (Aug 28) -- When disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes or even a bombing devastate a city, someone has to sift through the rubble and look for survivors. A group of civil engineers recently journeyed here in order to prepare themselves to do just that.

The System To Locate Survivors (STOLS) team which consist of 12 civil engineers from the Japan Engineer District (JED) from Camp Zama in mainland Japan, and three civil engineers from Honolulu, Hawaii, was formed approximately one-year ago. They came to Combat Town here to conduct three days of search and rescue operations to sharpen their skills and give the new members of the team some field experience.

"In order to conduct the type of training that is really beneficial to us, we needed a facility like this one," said Simon Rosa, chief emergency management officer, JED. "It allows the team to get some good on-hands training and apply everything they have learned in the classroom."

The first day the team attended briefings to refresh them on the various types of equipment they would be using and the types of structures they would be entering.

The group spent their second day here sharpening their first-aid, rappelling, equipment operation, and various rigging system skills.

Their third and final day they put all of the knowledge together in a scenario-driven exercise that revolved around an earthquake disaster which had resulted in the collapse of a six-story apartment building.

In order to search for and locate survivors, the team split into two groups. The first group was responsible for the ropes and rigging necessary to insert rescuers into the building through a narrow sky light on the roof. They were also responsible for bringing them and any survivors they found back out.

Meanwhile, the other group, equipped with high-tech listening devices and first-aid equipment, ventured into the bowels of the building to search for victims.

The rescuers quickly set up the listening devices, called life-detectors, and shouted for any victims to begin tapping so they could be located.

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Once a victim was discovered the team made their way to him and began administering first-aid. When they had him stabilized, they strapped him to a hard-plastic stretcher and carried him back up to the top floor. There he was lifted out through the opening in the roof and transferred by rope and pulley to the safety of the ground below.

"Our mission is to find victims, treat them and move them out," said Rosa. "In order to accomplish that mission, we have to conduct continuous training because the skills we have are perishable."

According to Rosa, the team, which is tailored for disasters on military installations, conducts one or two major exercises like this one a year, but conducts a lot of training on their own.

"Since these skills are perishable, we have to continually practice to remain proficient," said Rosa. "All of these guys realize that and spend their own time becoming familiar with the listening devices, practicing rappelling, conducting first-aid techniques and learning how to rig insertion and extraction equipment."

The team finished their main exercise late in the morning. That afternoon they again split into two groups and conducted similar exercises, but on a smaller scale.

"This training was really good stuff," said Reid Oshiro, a mechanical engineer from JED. "This is my first time in the field, and it has been very beneficial. The training and the scenarios were pretty realistic and it made you really think and apply everything you've learned in class."

Everyone seemed to share Oshiro's feelings. "This training has been a blast," said Cliff Takano, electrical design engineer, Fort Shaftner, Honolulu, Hawaii. "We don't get to do much realistic hands-on training like this. It has been a really good refresher and it has helped us learn what works and what doesn't."

All of the rescuers are volunteers, but all seemed to volunteer for the same reason...to help people. "You'll never get more of a sense of satisfaction than knowing you have helped someone or saved their life," said Rosa. "That's what really motivates us."

"I volunteered because I think this is a very worthy cause," said Oshiro. "To save a person's life is the most rewarding thing a person can do during his life."

The volunteers headed home with some lessons learned and some new skills, which they hope they never have to use. "We hope that a disaster never happens," said Oshiro. "But if it does we'll be there."

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INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

A . Report Title: Civil Engineers Hone Search, Rescue Skills at Combat Town

B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet 8/31/98

C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office Symbol, & Ph #): Sgt. Jason J. Bortz
Marine Corps Base
Quantico, VA 22134

D. Currently Applicable Classification Level: Unclassified

E. Distribution Statement A: Approved for Public Release

F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:
DTIC-OCA, Initials: UM **Preparation Date:** 8/31/98

The foregoing information should exactly correspond to the Title, Report Number, and the Date on the accompanying report document. If there are mismatches, or other questions, contact the above OCA Representative for resolution.